

In solidarity with our colleagues facing antisemitism allegations

November 13, 2023 - This response was written over a week ago. In response to our submission, the Globe indicated they do not publish rebuttals. Although we had been seeking alternative publication venues, given threats, suspensions, and doxxing facing our colleagues and teachers we are publicly circulating the piece.

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A response to Oded Haklai's OpEd published in The Globe on November 2, 2023.

In his November 3rd Op Ed, Professor Oded Haklai of Queen's University argues that 'anti-Jewish bias has deeply permeated university culture,' such that antisemitism has been systematically excluded from Equity, Diversity, Inclusion [EDI] definitions. He claims that Jews on university campuses are being silenced in their efforts to speak out on behalf of Israel, and to give voice to their "experiences of oppression". We are Jewish faculty members deeply engaged in our universities' life and we disagree.

Haklai's claim that antisemitism is left out of policy, whether at universities, school boards or at federal and provincial governments, is simply disingenuous. Antisemitism task forces have been convened at universities across the country, and the federal government has a special envoy on antisemitism. Indeed, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism that his oped favours was formally adopted by the federal government in 2019 and by the Ontario government in 2020.

Haklai is right to note that the context surrounding the International Holocaust Remembrance [IHRA] working definition of antisemitism has been "fraught." The IHRA has been challenged by faculty unions in universities and by organizations such as Independent Jewish Voices and the Jewish Faculty Network because it conflates antisemitism with criticisms of the policies of the State of Israel, in much the same way as his OpEd, erasing the view of many Jews who are critical of Israel. Even Kenneth Stern, one of the authors of the IHRA definition, has spoken out against the IHRA's "weaponization" to suppress campus speech. In linking antisemitism narrowly to challenges to Israel's policies, and then claiming such challenges demand the protection of EDI infrastructure, antisemitism is weaponized to protect Israel from criticism. And such weaponization has indeed occurred. Most recently, critics of Israel on university campuses were denounced as "antisemites" by Ontario Post-Secondary Education Minister Jill Dunlop at Queen's Park.

And herein lies the essence of the problem with Haklai's cri de coeur, and why we feel compelled to respond.

Labeling criticism of Israel as antisemitic has already had a real chilling effect. It is particularly damaging in its use to silence the speech of university faculty of colour and Indigenous colleagues, who are often at the forefront of Palestinian solidarity because their academic expertise and experience in anti-racist and anti-colonial work compels them to point out the many connections between Palestine and other settler colonial settings. Some of these colleagues were hired for their expertise on questions that EDI policies legitimately aim to address. Indeed, their expertise is frequently the referent for university administrators to evidence commitments to decolonial and anti-racist practice. Yet it is their voices that the IHRA aims to silence and their scholarly expertise that is overwhelmingly the target of accusations of antisemitism. Targeting scholars for their criticism of Israel, in particular scholars of colour, thus impedes their very ability to speak in the classroom, at faculty meetings, and in public. This trend is so widespread across North America and Europe that it has been identified as a new McCarthyism.

To date, no University administration in Ontario has made a public statement explicitly supporting those colleagues who face daily harassment and silencing efforts. While the same administrators have been quick to condemn student groups which express solidarity with Palestine, they have been at best silent and more frequently complicit, in the harassment, doxing, social media threats, and public repudiations of faculty, particularly faculty of colour, speaking in support of the Palestinian struggle. The disparity in administrative responses threatens principles of academic freedom, and the claimed commitment to equity that they so boldly assert.

At these times of rising antisemitism from the far right, conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism is a dangerous

distraction not only from real antisemitism, but most crucially from Israel's genocidal bombing of Palestinians in Gaza.